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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted in Sweden to gain an understanding of the learning conditions for educationally disadvantaged female distance education students. The research methodology included questionnaires on background and attitudes distributed to the 280 students who had enrolled in a television course on child psychology in 1993 (83% responded) and 2 series of personal interviews with 6 of the women students who returned the surveys and had less than 10 years of formal education. The study showed that these women had a high degree of independence and autonomy. They had gained knowledge relevant to the course through their jobs as mothers or in day care centers. Three aspects of support--cognitive, social, and emotional--played a very important role for the six successful women. They were also aided in their ability to take the course and learn from it by being in permanent relationships with financial security. (Contains 16 references.) (KC)

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Success stories

Some characteristics of educationally disadvantaged women making success in a distance education course

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INTRODUCTION

The Swedish setting

Social and educational reforms in Sweden have since the 60's acted on inequality in education. One of the aims has been to broaden the educational possibilities for disadvantaged groups. Women have been one of the target groups. (Gerhardsson, 1985) The reforms have lead to changes in the educational systems on secondary level, as well as to new systems for organising compensatory education and to support-systems for education and training in business and industry. The efficiency of the reforms however has been low, and the already well educated are the ones who gained most by the efforts. (Rubenson & Olofsson 1986)

Like other industrial nations Sweden is facing new and high demands on people's competence. Distance Education is looked upon as one important key to the solution to those demands. (SOU 1993:16, SOU 1992:7) Approximately 850000 people in the Swedish work force still have less than ten years of formal education and many of them will be at work for another ten to twenty years (SOU 1993:23). One of the issues raised is if Distance Education really is the right way to approach the foreseen change processes for this group. Will really Distance Education and the people within this educationally disadvantaged group match? Reviewing the experiences from Distance Education through the years it becomes apparent that the typical distance student is not a person with a short educational history. Holmberg (1990) shows that it is mainly persons with short formal education that drop out from distance studies. In addition, there are findings which show that women as a group are over-represented in the drop out statistics. It is rather the educationally experienced students one finds in the population of successful distant learners.

The Learner and Distance Education

In early writings on Distance Education researchers as Delling, Wedemeyer and Moore discussed learner perspectives. The main concepts in their theories were *autonomy* and *independence*. There are variations in the use of these two concepts but, broadly summarised, the meaning is that an educating organisation gives the learner independence and the learner controls her study situation autonomously. Garrison (1990) and Baynton (1992) use the term *control* instead of autonomy and point out that a student's control over the studies is a result of three interacting components. These are independence, competence or proficiency and support. *Independence* is mainly related to the student's choice of goals. It is considered unusual that students develop to be fully self-directed learners. *Competence* is the students' ability to plan and organise their studies so they reach completion. Earlier experiences of and attitudes towards studying as well as the student's knowledge-base are factors within the concept of competence. The last component in the model is *support*. By support is meant the practical arrangements around the studies, such as course materials and the economic situation, but also social relations. Possibilities to combine study and family obligations are thus considered important.

The findings of Holmberg (ibid.) and others on drop-outs and successful students are easily understood when the core concepts concerning Distance Education and Distance Learning are presented this way. Independence, competence and support, in the theoretical meanings given by Garrison and Baynton, are not easily found in any student's everyday life.

THE AIM OF THIS STUDY

It is evident that we need more knowledge about the use of Distance Education as a tool for social change. Ideas about adapting the work forces to the "IT-era" obviously also need support from research directed towards this problem area. Our quest for knowledge in this study has been in the midst of that. We aim towards a better understanding of the learning conditions for an educationally disadvantaged distant student.

Being in what we still can think of as an explorative phase of this research we chose to phrase our question the following way: Which are the factors behind successful studies for an educationally disadvantaged distant student?

It so happened that when we started to search for empirical information to answer our question we found a group of female students which matched our interests. One could claim that we then had a group of subjects disadvantaged by both sex and a short educational history.

PROCEDURE

The Distance Education course

The Swedish National Broadcasting Company produces distance courses in various fields. Some of them are on tertiary level and organised together with one or more of the universities. We were looking for a course which would attract not just traditional university students but also students with minor experiences of studies on this level and in this format. It is possible to be admitted to this type of course on the criteria that you are 25 years of age and have had four years of working life experience.

During 1993 the broadcasting company ran a course on child psychology for the second time. The course was equivalent to ten weeks of full time university studies but was spread over a full academic year. The course had an extensive study guide but apart from that it relied on traditional course literature. Theoretical overviews and practical examples were given in twelve television programmes and eight radio programmes. Five times during the course the students met tutors and other students at the universities involved.

The target group was personnel working in different forms of child care. We assumed therefore that a large majority of the students would be females.

Three combined studies

Our resources for conducting the research were limited and we needed "expensive" qualitative data about the students. The decision was therefore to combine different methods in a series of studies. As a core study we did personal interviews with a small number of the students. Before we could go through with these we had to identify the group of students we were interested in.

Approximately 300 students followed the course and our main interest was to find a minority group among them. The broadcasting company was interested in obtaining formative and summative information about the course. Our first step was to construct a questionnaire covering background information about the students and their views on different course topics. It consisted of multiple-choice questions, rating scales and open questions. The questionnaire was distributed to all students registered in the course.

We planned and performed the second and third studies in the following way. Via the questionnaire we identified the female students matching our purpose. They should have

- less than ten years of formal schooling and
- completed the course and received their academic credits for it.

When the female students were identifies according to these criteria, the second step was to contact them for a telephone interview. The interview was structured and concentrated on four areas: three covering different aspects of the course design and one on the personal outcomes of the course.

During the third step we made personal interviews with 50% of the women taking part in step two. We used a method often referred to as life history. (Warren 1981, Davies 1989) The aim of the interview was to get qualitative information on the students' personal situation.

Aspects on relevance, reliability and validity

Essential to this study was to get an abundant picture of the subjects. In order to get enough information with such qualities that we could enlighten our question, information was collected from different viewpoints and in that sense we did a triangulation (Denzin, 1980; Mathison, 1988).

The questionnaire had been carefully tried out in the sense that the majority of the questions have been used in several earlier studies.

All interviews were carried out by Mrs Jana Emmoth. Notes were taken during the telephone interviews and a taperecorder was used during the life-history sessions. The interviews were then transcribed. With one exeption the interviews were performed in the subjects' homes.

RESULTS

First study

The questionnaire was distributed to 280 students. After reminding the respondents twice we had a response rate of 83%. Twenty-nine of the answers came from persons with less than ten years of formal education. Twenty-eight of them were women. Out of the 28 women seventeen had passed the exams and gained academic credit points (Emmoth & Holmberg 1994).

The seventeen women varied in age between 25 and 59. All lived together with another adult (3) or with another adult and children (14). One of them had followed a distance course previously. Ten of them were full time employees, six worked between 25-70% of full time and one was a house-wife. Eleven of them took part in the course mainly out of own interest. Four of the others stated that the main motive for attending the course was related to their work. Eight of them paid the course fee themselves, five paid part of the fee and the employer the rest and four had their course fees covered by the employer. Thirteen of them took part in all five tutorials and the others in four or three tutorials. Sixteen of them took part in informal study groups.

Second and third study

It was possible to trace thirteen of the seventeen women. They were contacted by phone to agree on a time for the telephone interview. When the interview was carried out two of them were ill so the group in the second study finally consisted of eleven women. Out of the eleven six were asked to take part in a personal interview. They all agreed to do that and the interviews were carried out a few weeks after the telephone interview. The only criteria for selecting the six women out of the eleven was that we should be able to reach them without extensive costs. They all got a letter informing about the meeting to come. In the letter we also presented the topics to be discussed. The six women are presented in table1.

The two series of interviews were very productive and we got a rich picture of the women. As an example follows a condensed version of one of the stories.

Table 1: The six women in the core study

	Age	*Occup.*	*Locat.*	*Relat.*	*Children*
Ada	25	B	Town	Cohabiter	1
Eliza	37	C	Town	Married	3
Isa	59	C	Town	Married	4*
Olga	48	D	City	Married	2*
Ulla	39	C	Town	Married	3
Yvon	33	C	City	Married	4

B= Leisure time leader, C=Community employed day-mother, D= Therapy assista .

*The children have left home.

Eliza's story about her life and studies

Eliza is now 37 years. She grew up in a small town together with her parents and two sisters. They lived in a small flat. Already at sixteen she decided to leave home. She was tired of school and wanted to earn some money of her own. At eighteen she married and got over the years three sons. Her husband is an immigrant from Finland.

Eliza worked for many years in industry. Her husband is also a blue collar worker. Within her work Eliza followed a few shorter courses. The best thing about her situation, she thought, was that she and her husband could take turns with the kids. In that way they did not need any other child care. Shorter periods she spent full time at home with the kids.

When the first baby was born and until recently her husband worked from 6 am until noon. In this way they could share a lot of the practical household work and the children loved to have their father at home most of their time.

Eliza is interested in what is going on in society and she loves to try new things.

She often took her children to a nearby pre-school so they could play with the other kids. At the pre-school they noticed her interest in children and asked her if she wished to become a community employed day-mother. Eliza liked the idea and since December 1993 she has full time duty as a community employed day-mother. This often involves starting at 6.30 in the morning and ending at 6.30 in the evening. She loves her new job and finds it both rewarding and developing.

She often takes the children in her ward to a community centre so they can meet other children and she can meet other adults.

Eliza applied for the course in Child Psychology out of her own interest in children. She paid the course fees and the literature herself but her employer has afterwards compensated her for the expenses. Eliza studied together with her sister-in-law, but she had difficulties to keep up with the pace. Eliza gave her a lot of support, but also felt that she would have needed some herself. She should have liked to have a few more study-mates.

DISCUSSION

Looking back we have to admit that we started these studies somewhat prejudiced. We expected to meet something new, something beyond the already established theories describing successful distant learners and we have not done so. What we will discuss here supports the theories and neglects our thoughts in advance about the lives of six women with a short educational history.

Independence

All six females thought early in life of studying at upper secondary level.. For different reasons they all ended up not doing so. They went into working life or took care of younger siblings. From these positions they all succeeded to make active choices of routes in life. Moore (1990) points out that this ability is something one is born with or achieves via educational experiences. The women's ways of reasoning around these decision processes demonstrate a high degree of independence and autonomy. The are "self-directed-learners" (Moore, 1977; Garrison, 1990)

Competence

Even if the youngest of the women was just 25 she already has had nine years of working life experience. All six had gained knowledge with relevance to the course through their jobs. Most important - which was very evident when the telephone interviews and the life-histories were thoroughly analysed - they all had very demanding, self-directed and creative jobs. To be a good "community employed day-mother" you need to be very flexible. Working with children and their parents does not allow routines or rigid plans. Still, the job needs a lot of planning and organising to get all pieces in place. Garrison (1990) points out that self reliance and motivation are two other aspects of *competence*. The women demonstrated that in selecting and applying for the course.

Support

The different aspects of *support* played a very important role for the six successful women. Garrison (1990) considers support from two different angles. Human and non-human resources support with i.e. course materials and communication media. Socio-economic aspects can be supportive in the sense that one has money enough for one's daily living and that the family relations are sound.

It can also be productive to specify support in *cognitive, social* and *emotional* dimensions (Holmberg, 1994). Throughout the three different studies the students were very satisfied with the course design. They got a lot of cognitive support from the study materials. Most important though was meeting fellow students and tutors in small groups. To share the experiences of

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others and to discuss their own experiences explained puzzling parts of the course.

Sixteen out of the seventeen women who successfully went through the course were employed and all of them lived in a permanent relationship. This meant that they had a secure economy and that they in some cases had employers interested in their professional development. It also meant that they could try out or apply ideas from the course in their daily practice.

Many of the women informed us about the dependence between the students. They showed concern for each other and cared for fellow students. Another important form of emotional support came from their families.

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